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How to Start a Public Library



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HOW TO START A PUBLIC
LIBRARY

BY

DR. G. E. WIRE

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HOW TO START A PUBLIC LIBRARY

DR. G. E. WIRE, WORCESTER COUNTY LAW LIBRARY

FIRST, find out what public library legislation is on your state statute books. It is unwise to begin on uncertainty. Most of our States now have permissive public library laws, and one at least has a mandatory law. The Illinois law is cited as the best of the direct tax laws; Massachusetts is cited as a good example of the direct grant law. Other good laws are those of New Jersey for small cities and townships, and that of Wisconsin allowing books to circulate outside the corporate limits on certain conditions.

The essential features of the Illinois public library law are these: Cities are allowed to levy a tax of not to exceed two mills on the dollar, and in cities of one hundred thousand inhabitants this shall not exceed one mill on the dollar; directors are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council, with the usual provision for overlapping terms; the directors have exclusive control of library funds, of the administration of the library, and of buying real estate; all persons are free to use the library; directors must make an annual report and have power to accept gifts. Villages have somewhat more restricted powers, and directors are elective.

The Massachusetts law is very simple, having only three sections — giving authority to the town or city to establish a library; to grant and vote money for a library, and to turn over to such library, books, reports, and laws which have been received from the State. A section in the dog-license law provides that after all claims for losses have

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been settled the residue is to go back to the towns for libraries or schools. Many of the town libraries are thus supported by the dogs.

It will readily be seen that the Illinois law is superior in that it provides a direct and special tax for the library, and in some cases this is not to be reckoned into the whole amount of taxation to be raised by the township or village. This amount of taxation has, however, been reduced by some city boards ; but on the whole it is better than a law allowing only a sum of money to be granted, leaving the amount to the discretion and generosity of the authorities. Libraries are being rapidly built up in Illinois, and this law has been widely copied in the Mississippi Valley, and other States still further west.

Suppose now familiarity with the law to have been obtained. The next step is to AGITATE, AGITATE, AGITATE, and keep on agitating.

To begin at the beginning, first hold a meeting of a few friends at some residence and agree on what is wanted, then start public meetings. Have some speeches by home talent, and if possible, some by outsiders on the benefits of public libraries. Let all the professions, law, medicine, and teaching, all the clergy and literary men and women, make common cause in the library interest.

All possible publicity must be given the movement. First, as to the press. The local papers should all be enlisted in the cause if possible, and articles setting forth the advantage of public libraries should appear in their columns. The benefits of public libraries, as supplementing the work of the public schools, should also be emphasized. Then dodgers and handbills should be used. This latter procedure, of course, is clearly necessary on the eve of an election for adopting a library law. Circulars by mail or messenger should also be employed, bringing home the matter to many people who may not be in touch with public affairs. Wall posters might be used, although this may be regarded as an

extreme measure. Mass meetings addressed by enthusiasts on the subject are the most popular form of reaching the public. Let the meeting be well advertised in the papers, by dodgers and posters as well as by announcements from pulpits and elsewhere. The largest hall in town or the largest church should be engaged, well-lighted, comfortable, with plenty of good music, and plenty of enthusiastic speakers. The speeches should be short, interspersed with music. Another plan is to have some eminent library specialist address the meeting at some length. Different methods reach different constituencies. Library sermons may be used with effect. Many good people may be reached in this way who might not be reached in others. A library fair will not only attract much attention to the library which is to be, but also will gain some money for it. In the close work of a campaign, a house-to-house canvass may be necessary. This should be done thoroughly by tactful persons, otherwise more harm than good will result. The men's clubs and the women's clubs should also be enlisted in the propaganda. Different methods will apply to them, but they should all take a hand in the work. The men's clubs represent the wealth and influence, social and political, of the community; the women's clubs represent society and the social element. Both are valuable allies in the work of agitation. Indeed, the women's clubs in many parts of the country are of the greatest aid in this work, for they have constant need of a public library for reference purposes. They make good advocates and good canvassers for the cause.

Local pride and emulation also help wonderfully, as in cases where a neighboring town has a useful and well managed public library.

All of these forces must pull together and keep at it, in order to create a sentiment for a public library, and in some cases this must continue for months and even years. Apathy of the most lamentable kind frequently prevails,

and all sorts of arguments are used to bolster up the opposition. The expense, the additional taxation, is of course one of the first objections to be met. The individual expense is rarely figured out; but when it is it will be found to be so low as to make objection on this ground untenable. Five thousand dollars a year among twenty thousand people is certainly not burdensome. The most opposition of this nature will be met in places having a large foreign population, or from rich people who don't want their taxes increased, don't want books, and don't want others to have them.

Another argument urged against the public library is the amount of fiction in the library and the number of novels that will be read. This argument has sometimes been used in a most unjustifiable manner. The proportion of fiction, adult and juvenile, in a library varies from fifteen to twenty-five per cent., — it is generally about twenty per cent., — but the percentage of the reading of fiction is from sixty to eighty per cent., the average being seventy-five per cent. These figures have been used and abused to imply that seventy-five per cent. of the volumes in a library are fiction. Good, clean, healthy fiction never hurts any one, and is much to be preferred to no reading at all. Libraries now aim to keep none but the best, and by personal effort manage to diminish not a little the proportion of fiction read.

Perhaps the weakest argument, nevertheless one often brought forward, is that the library will form a convenient meeting place for people, meaning women who go shopping, and others who do not come to read. This hardly needs an answer. Only a few of the advantages of a public library are noted in this paper, as these have been treated more fully in the first number of this series. Some of the arguments against a public library have been given, however, and the attempt made to show where some of the opposition will come from, as this is varied and many times

unlooked for. Some people oppose every new thing on general principles.

Having treated the case where there is a public library law, let us now pass to the case where there is no public library law on the statute books.

Here two lines of action are possible; first, to get an act passed, and second, to work for a free public library without a special act.

It is advisable generally to begin a public library under existing laws, either subscription library laws, or general corporation laws, or association laws. These are found in every State. Even a subscription library may be run as a public library, and, in fact, many are so conducted so far as reading-room and reference use are concerned. Still another and better plan, much to be preferred if possible, is to have a free public library supported by subscriptions and gifts, and free to the public. Such was the beginning of the New York (City) Free Circulating Library.

Some definite action should be taken along one of these various lines; for in any enterprise the best way to start is to start, and not only to talk about it.

In any of these cases there must be an organization,—due care being taken to conform to the law under which action is taken. A constitution and by-laws are needed, providing for the purpose of the association, its name, and its officers. Regarding the latter, provision should be made for their election, with their terms of office, duties, power to receive, hold, and dispose of all property real and personal, the engagement of employees, and responsibility for reports and auditing, debts and dues. Great care must be exercised to keep always in mind the non-mercantile aspect of the work, to spend no money on buildings, lectures, pictures, or museums, but to devote all energies to building up the library and to doing library work in its different ramifications. This is all only a preparatory step toward having a free public library supported by the people, *of the people, for the people.*

Be as liberal as possible with all the library advantages and so gain friends among the taxpayers, looking toward a time when the institution shall be the people's library. Avoid all rings, cliques, and combinations, as tending to belittle the library and as foreign to its spirit.

Having made this start, attention should be turned to the legislative side of the question. Collect and study library laws, keeping in mind local needs as a State, and also the sentiment of the people. In New England, for example, there is a stanch home feeling, a self-government bias, which differs from the tendency toward paternalism found in some of the newer States.

As a basis the Illinois law may be recommended as better and fairer all around than the New England appropriation laws, or the New York State subsidy law.

Having settled on the main features of the law desired, enlist your own assemblymen and senators in the work, and when the legislature is in session the library workers should send on their best lobbyists and stay with the bill until it becomes a law or is defeated. It may be necessary to "trim" somewhat, in order to get the bill through, but the main purpose of the law should be guarded and there should be as little tampering as possible. The most vulnerable points will be the amount of tax, how levied and collected, and the appointment of boards of directors and their powers. Fortunately in all but a few of our States politics cut little or no figure in the management of the public library. It is not considered a place for the spoilsman, and although there would seem to be some patronage connected with the positions, they are usually not so lucrative as to affect even the librarianship, let alone the assistants. On this account, and also because as a class librarians attend strictly to their business and let politics alone, our libraries are almost *sui generis* in matters of politics.

So much for starting a public library under public library

laws or other laws, and for securing a public library law where none existed before. Now to some general problems occurring in any or all of the subjects treated. Remember, this is genuine missionary work. Some of it will be unappreciated, some of it will be opposed, methods are likely to be criticised and motives maligned. If one is sensitive either to blame, criticism, or neglect, one would better retire and give place to a stronger and safer leader. Until you undertake something of this kind and are brought into contact not only with the classes but the masses, you will not know of how complex a body politic you are a member.

Always keep in mind that the library when it comes must be free to *all*, and that sooner or later it must pass out of the hands of those who have in the first instance made it possible and have carefully nurtured it in its infancy, and that eventually it must be carried on by other brains and other hands. Therefore the policy chosen should be broad and generous and noble. The masses as well as the classes are to use the library, and the former outnumber and outvote the latter. In saying this, there is no thought of advising any lowering of tone, any pandering to bad taste. But the policy adopted should be neither aristocratic nor exclusive. Great care should be taken in the selection of the members of the board: no sects, no creeds, no fads should be allowed undue influence.

It will be a surprise some time to note the growth of the worker's own ideas through this work. This can, perhaps, be best explained by an illustration. In one library the book committee of the trustees objected to the purchase of some free-trade books for the library. They were all protectionists, had no use for such works, and regarded the library as their private collection. They were told by the librarian that this was a *public* library, and both sides of a controversy must be *fully* represented. This was an entirely new thought to them. The library is no place for propaganda, no place for narrow and one-sided work. This

breadth of view should be shown in the organization of committees, and great pains should be taken to harmonize all the various conflicting elements which will have to be enrolled in order to enlist all the different interests of the place. As a rule more care must be taken in the first stages of development than is necessary even in the formation of the first board of directors or trustees, for this reason: that after a thing is started it gains momentum as it goes along and stands a certain amount of adversity and bad management without disastrous results, whereas in its inchoate state, as an idea, care must be taken to keep the germ alive until its appearance in concrete form. So all discretion, forbearance, and tact should be exercised by the promoters if they wish to succeed with the public. In the selection of members of the library board, besides allying all factions and representing all the various interests, it is an essential that live men and women should be chosen. What are needed are some intelligent, keen, business men, some women to look after their part of the work, and one or two well-rounded literary men. Let there be also a fair representation of the young and progressive members of the community, and be chary of selecting so-called "scholars," who too often are men of one subject.

The librarian should be chosen soon after the organization of the trustees. In the growth of the library movement, he has become better equipped than in the earlier days, and it is altogether the safest and best plan to let him do most of the book selection. Time was when the directors of the small library did all the book buying, the librarian not being accounted able to suggest reading for the public. But the librarian nowadays is generally equipped for all parts of his work, is in constant touch with the public, and it is his business to know what people are reading, what they want, and what books are coming out. He alone can keep the library well-rounded. Let me give an instance from my own observation: A library of twenty years'

growth of about twenty thousand volumes had been built up, largely by one man's selection. He had spent much time and thought on the buying of books, and when the opportunity came to reorganize it and classify it, I was more and more impressed with the excellent character of the library. I count it the best library of its size that I know. And yet that library had not a single book on these subjects: trained nursing, cooking, dressmaking, bicycle repairing, stenography, oil and gas engines, or boat building. It needed a librarian's eye to see just these defects and to remedy them. So there is less need than formerly of having a board of "literary" people. The library of to-day is a vital institution, quick to respond to the varied needs of its constituency, and the governing body should be alert, far-seeing, looking not to the past with its traditions, not alone to the present with its needs, but far into the future to its possibilities.

Care should be taken in choosing the model on which the library is to be developed. Do not go to the largest public library for advice and blanks and forms, for few libraries of even one hundred thousand volumes are fit models for a small library. Go to some place of nearly equal size which possesses a new library building, new collections of books, and the new library atmosphere. Having studied that thoroughly, go to another one, always carefully remembering local conditions and local needs, the limitation of the building by its surroundings or the wishes of the giver, always noting the fact that no two collections of books designed for different communities should be exactly alike.

Be not building-crazy. Let the library grow and develop first and see what you need. Do not for a moment think of putting all the money into a building and none into books or maintenance, thus at the outset defeating the purpose of the library.

Regarding rules and regulations: have as few as possible and make those as inconspicuous as possible. There is

no reason why the library should rival the county jail in this respect. Here again there should be special care regarding the models chosen. I know one library whose directors went to a library of two hundred and fifty thousand volumes in a large city, and adopted the guarantor's blank there in use,—as long, legal, and involved as a chattel mortgage. All the matter necessary can be put on the back of a business card, and in some libraries even this is being done away with, and a simple reference required instead. Remember that library attendance is not compulsory; people should be encouraged and invited to come to the library, not driven away by rules, regulations, and red tape.

It may be well here to note a few of the lines of modern library work, even though this may entail a certain amount of repetition. These lines include circulating, reference, school, and club work, and work for children. These may all be carried on in one small room, but as they develop there should be at least three separate rooms or places overlooked from a central point. We are coming more and more to the adoption of free access to shelves. By this is meant letting people select their own books at the shelves, taking them to the desk to be charged. All of these details, as well as those of location, accessibility, quiet, light, air, building, rooms, book selection, book buying, cataloguing, classification, charging systems, shelving, lighting, heating and ventilation, selection of assistants, care and repairs of building, rules and regulations, will be more fully considered under the topic Organization of a Library, which properly comes after this work of starting a library. For that reason none of these have been considered in detail.

But above all and beyond all should the workers in this cause absorb the library spirit, the missionary spirit. They should attend library meetings of their own State, by all means; they should attend the meetings of the American

Library Association if these are held reasonably near, and they should visit as many libraries as they can. When on the latter errand, they should not go to see the books, the building, or the catalogue alone; but to see how the library is conducted, to meet the librarian, and see the librarian meet the people. They should study the work in all its many branches and see how these are all inter-related, how they all work together for the upbuilding of a community. There will be surprises in many directions. Much work can be done on small capital by a tactful, bright, enthusiastic worker, and such workers are most often women. The high position which the small public library of to-day holds in the minds of the people is due largely to the woman's work put into the library. No amount of money, no fine building, no large collection of books can make up for the deficiency of a living, working brain and heart. So in all studying and planning this should be always borne in mind. The mission of the public library is largely to that ninety per cent of the people whose formal education ends with the grammar school, and the great question now in the minds of all librarians is how to reach and help these people. This is the present mission of the public library in the United States, especially in small places and in manufacturing centres. As a rule, the public library does not make a special effort to help the learned, for in many cities there are public, endowed reference libraries for this special purpose, but it does bend every energy toward helping those who need help most.

Bear this always in mind in preparatory work, and again and more particularly when the work of actual organization begins. It is emphatically the greatest good for the greatest number that is desired, and no building should be too fine, no collection of books too costly, to be above or beyond this aim, nor should any set of rules, red tape, or rigid regulations interfere with this development. The library should be for the people, and they should be first

considered in its work. It is required, therefore, to be diligent in doing, liberal in policy, far-seeing in plans both for present and future, that in no way should the benefit of the work be lost to any one, nor the true purpose of the library be defeated.

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